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Article

Overcoming Equity-Related Challenges for the Education and Training Systems of Europe

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Abstract: This paper is a discussion of the challenges to equity faced by the education and training systems of the 28 EU countries (at time of writing), based on secondary sources and official reports by individual countries. The data are descriptive and simply summarised for this paper. The systems of all countries are fairly similar, modelled on those set up to deal with challenges of early industrialisation, and all now face several similar problems and opportunities. There is a clear correlation between family background, average attainment, and subsequent participation in education and training. All 28 countries show some signs of progress over time, both in terms of the absolute level of attainment, and in terms of reduced gaps between social and economic groups. These trends are historical, and thus hard to link to specific policies. However, looking at the common characteristics of countries with similar levels of equity can produce a tentative guide to its determinants. Some of the main suggestions are: More countries to set up monitoring systems for school intakes and outcomes; more robust evaluations of policy interventions; fair funding and opportunities for all students; extra funding for students facing challenges; no selection by ability or anything else; all taught in mainstream settings; no tracking or grade retention; more recognition of prior experience and learning; respectful interaction with all students; and use of context when allocating places in higher education, or simply more open access.

Keywords: education policy; EU; equity in education; international comparisons; secondary data analysis

1. Introduction

This paper reports on the main challenges to equity in provision and outcomes, as faced by the education and training (ET) systems of Europe, using 2013/4 as the base year for comparison, and considering in 2020 the EU plan “Education and Training in Europe 2020” [1]. It provides a summary of, and the implications from, 28 individual country reports, commissioned by the EU and written by experts in each country, approved by the relevant EU country desk officers, but not published and so unable to be cited directly. These reports are extended by subsequent secondary data analyses by the author. The synthesis involves considerations of the notions of equity used in different countries, the indicators available or prioritised, the current patterns and trends in ET, the national policies in place that might affect equity, and the proposals suggested to improve the situation further. The purpose of the original reports was to help countries and the EU Commission prepare for the 2020 objectives.

The next section looks at the notions of equity as represented in the 28 country reports. The paper then looks at the evidence assembled and outlines the major current issues for equity within and across countries. The conclusion considers the policies in place in higher and lower equity countries, and so makes some plausible policy recommendations.

1.1. What Is Equity in Education?

This section summarises the notion of “equity”. There was some variation across the 28 countries in terms of how equity in ET is interpreted, partly due to philosophical underpinnings, the nature of available large-scale datasets, and national policies and priorities. Equity in the sense used in these reports is a synonym for the terms ‘fair’ or ‘fairness’. It simply means the state, quality, or ideal of being impartial, just, and fair. Recognising such a state involves an attempt to understand how and why something can be judged to be fair, or unfair. There are well-known principles, such as equality of treatment and equal access to opportunities, which purport to lay down what fairness is. But there is no single principle or set of criteria that adheres in all situations. Any given criterion intended to enhance justice will be flawed in the sense that it will tend to lead to perceived injustice in some situations [2]. Difference, in itself, is not inequity. Inequity must offend at least one principle of justice such as equal outcomes, or equal opportunity. Each principle applies only to a sub-set of the contexts of education and training—all young people must have access to schools, but not all must be expected to get the highest grades in order for a system to be considered fair, for example.

Table 1 provides a summary of four possible principles of justice (each row), and four possible educational domains in which these principles could be applied (each column). These are illustrations of each dimension, and in reality, there could be many more of each. In the context of educational funding, ‘equal opportunity’ or equal funding per student might be considered fair. However, this could lead to unfairly unequal ‘educational outcomes’ if success in education depends on student background, or where some students face severe learning challenges. Therefore, extra funding could be provided for disadvantaged students fairly, so encouraging more equal outcomes. But equal outcomes may only be fair up to a certain point—a threshold entitlement such as functional literacy, perhaps. Up to this point, unequal opportunities may be the guiding principle used to achieve the threshold for all. After an agreed threshold, unequal outcomes might be fair only if they are deemed to recognise ‘merit’ instead [3], and only fair if the idea of merit is accepted and can be operationalised. In the context of an ‘educational procedure’ such as allocating school places, equal opportunity, and ‘respect’ for each individual would be fair. All of these actions could be defended as equitable by the same person, apparently consistently, as they strive to remain fair while respecting differences between individuals or groups of students [4]. However, many of the principles would be contradictory if applied together in the same domains or settings [5].

Table 1. Some principles of justice and the areas in which they might be applied.

	Educational Funding	Educational Procedures	Educational Interaction	Educational Outcomes
Equal opportunity	-	-	-	-
Equal outcome	-	-	-	-
Recognise merit	-	-	-	-
Respect individual	-	-	-	-

Note: The table has been much simplified. There could be more principles here, and more settings, such as family and home, or wider society.

Equality of outcome could refer to the outcomes for all, between socio-economic groups, or for individuals of equivalent talent [6]. It could refer to equal achievement for equivalent work. Inflexible equality of opportunity is liable to lead to marked inequality of outcomes in education. Those who start with greater talent, who can marshal greater resources at home, are the most interested in education, or who put the most effort into their study will tend to be the most successful. Greater equality of educational outcomes may involve treating individuals unequally from the outset instead, identifying the most disadvantaged and given them enhanced (and so unequal) opportunities.

There could be concern about some specific sub-groups of students, and a desire to offer an advantage to those from a disadvantaged group from which the individual cannot ‘escape’. Thus, geographic, religious, institutional, and linguistic differences which are all changeable to some extent may be less important in this respect than inequalities in terms of age, family background, ethnic origin, sex, sexual orientation, or disability, which are likely to be considered more permanent. There is also a view that no difference, in itself, is unjust, and so an inequality is only unjust precisely insofar as it can be avoided by others [7]. Responsibility theory suggests a fair allocation of resources between individuals defined by their ‘talent’—for which they are not responsible—and their ‘effort’—for which they are [8]. This argument is weakened if effort or willingness is the product of motivation, which is itself a product of their socio-economic status (SES), for which individuals are not responsible. Effort and ability anyway have very variable meanings [9], and could themselves be the product of background or resources.

Thus, it is not easy to decide whether something is fair, but there is some agreement across the 28 countries. These are very minimal principles applied to four sectors or phases of education and training (ET). In general, it is assumed in the reports that a fair system for ET will:

- Provide free universal access to initial education from around age 6 (and perhaps younger) to age 15 (and usually older).
- Fund initial education at a near-equal per capita rate.
- Provide higher education (HE) for those students deemed to merit it (itself a contested notion).
- Provide adult education and training, irrespective of employment status and prior qualifications.

These are descriptions of common elements appearing in the country reports (not recommendations).

1.1.1. Provide Free Universal Access to Initial Education

The first of these aims appears reasonably solid as a principle and, perhaps because of this, all countries report success in this regard. As with any system, a small number of children are not registered for school, while some are permitted home schooling. The differences between countries, and so the unfairness within and between countries, mainly lies in how this ‘universal’ access is operationalised. Most countries provide free schooling for all residents. A few only provide it for citizens, and a few only for residents who have paid taxes for a certain period (see below). Some countries strive to provide the same basis of education for all students, including those with special needs and behavioural difficulties, in the mainstream as far as possible, and eschewing any kind of tracking, streaming, or school diversity. However, additional funding is provided for students facing chronic challenges. This is all clearly fair. Others do the reverse, retaining special schools, tracks with different levels of prestige, and very different subsequent outcomes. Whatever the purported merits of such systems, these are clearly unfair in practice.

1.1.2. Fund Initial Education at a Near-Equal Per Capita Rate

This second aim also appears reasonable, all other things being equal. Nevertheless, several countries also have or plan to have a funding system in which more money is provided for disadvantaged students or for schools in disadvantaged areas. This is deemed fair, largely because the students (or schools) are not considered responsible for their relative disadvantage. It remains fair for as long as that disadvantage remains or until a clear threshold (such as functional literacy for an individual) is reached. For this reason, the more flexible form of funding following the students wherever they go, such as Pupil Premium in England, is preferable to extra funding being awarded to deprived areas or institutions. The latter unfairly provides extra funds for some students who are not objectively disadvantaged.

1.1.3. Provide Higher Education on Merit

This aim is less obviously fair [10]. There is no clear reason why education and training should be universally available up to any specific age or level of proficiency, then not for a subsequent three or more years. It is not clear on what basis only a certain percentage of the population is allowed to benefit from HE, nor how that percentage is obtained. There are large differences between countries in the percentages involved in HE. The concept of ‘merit’ is anyway hard to use in practice [11], despite being the standard approach named or implied in EU and OECD policy documents [12]. On the one hand, all countries use some form of prior test or qualification for entry to higher education at undergraduate level because this seemingly provides the justification of ‘merit’. Yet most express concern that the student intake to HE is stratified by region, age, sex, parental education, income, class, ethnicity, disability, and a range of other background or SES variables. If the latter situation is unfair, then merit selection is not working and should not be used as it is. The stratification arises largely because the prior attainment of the students is stratified by these same background variables. More work is needed to decide when (and why) education ceases to be a universal right, what percentage is intended to be included and excluded, and how the included subset is to be selected fairly [13].

1.1.4. Provide Adult Education and Training Available to All

The fourth general aim appears fair. Some countries have long-standing processes for the accreditation of prior learning and establishing equivalences between qualifications. Others are in the process of introducing these processes. Those adults with low levels of prior qualifications (or skills) and those currently out of work need development as much as those who are already employed. However, many countries describe deficiencies in access, provision, and funding, especially for those out of work or in insecure positions. This is a problem, which is most apparent in lack of consideration of the third-age, by which stage it is not expected that adults will be concerned with the world of work. Much policy discourse on ET is founded on a simple version of human capital theory (HCT), which is of only marginal relevance to the wider issues of equity.

2. The Evidence Used in This Report

There is wide variation in the nature of the evidence available for each country. Most do not provide evidence on actual attainment gaps or patterns of segregation. A few countries have official administrative data on most phases of education and training that includes various indicators of disadvantage such as poverty. This allows them to monitor changes in patterns of stratification over time and space. Some appear to have no administrative data at all, and only have evidence from limited survey studies such as PISA, which are insufficient for these purposes. Laying bare the patterns of inequity is the first step towards addressing them. More needs to be done here.

The range of categories considered in patterns of equity also varies between countries, again partly because of available datasets and partly due to national priorities. In addition to common classifications by country of origin, sex, ethnicity, SES, and parental education, some reports mention offenders, those with mental health problems, children living in care, religious minorities, and LGBT students. None mention teenage mothers. One reason is the lack of administrative data on such groups. To a great extent, countries focus most on those inequalities for which they have the best data.

The findings in this paper come from the policies in each country [1], and data on outcomes [14,15]. Very few policies have been robustly evaluated. It is clear that some countries have no evaluations at all, while most present ‘evaluations’ that are very weak (based on asking stakeholders what they think about a policy, for example). Much more needs to be done here.

Absolute levels of attainment and absolute levels of funding in themselves are generally not relevant to equity within each country unless they are distributed unfairly, or somehow lead to inequity. Some countries are more concerned with these general absolute levels, or their average comparisons with other countries, than with equity per se. The summaries that follow are based on what information

was provided in the reports, supplemented by more general data (i.e., not individual country accounts) such as in Eurydice, Eurostat, and OECD publications, as already cited.

3. Results

3.1. *Equity-Related Issues in Each Country*

The country summaries are presented in alphabetical order of the country name, as presented in English. In general, figures for any country are presented only when they are relatively high or low in comparison to the other 27. There is more publicly available evidence on countries that are OECD members and partners, and for whom PISA and other results are available. A number of factors are taken into account—including participation rates, SES, and ethnic segregation between institutions, the link between individuals' background and their attainment and trajectory, sex ratios in attainment and employment, or any other unwarranted different treatment. However, the data across countries is not uniform enough for the assignment of a country to an equity category to be more than a judgement. Each country's position is briefly summarised, and then the next section uses these summaries to draw some wider conclusions about patterns of equity.

3.1.1. Austria

Austria is a low equity country. According to OECD [14], it has a lower than average expenditure on education and training, in terms of Gross Domestic Product or GDP (5.7%). There is 78% participation for children aged 3 and 4, with schooling compulsory from age 6 to only 15 years of age. However, the NEET (not in education, employment, or training) rate for 15 to 19 year olds is low (less than 10%). Austria operated a system of tracking by ability in schools from age 10, and attempts to de-track students in grades 5 to 8 have not been successful. Austria also operates a system of repetition or grade retention, and such retention is disproportionately used for children of immigrants and those from poorly educated families. The proportion of the adult population qualified to tertiary level is low (20%), with a much higher likelihood for those whose parents also have tertiary qualifications, and the more qualified citizens earn considerably more. The parents of prospective HE students need to have paid income tax in Austria for five years or more in order to be eligible for a grant. Teachers have low salaries compared to other tertiary-qualified earners. Adult participation is often limited to those in work, and even for them it is clearly linked to their prior attainment.

3.1.2. Belgium

Belgium is a medium equity country. It actually has three separate education systems—based on the Flemish, French, and German languages, and to some extent they must be considered apart. According to OECD [14], Belgium spends a reasonably high proportion of GDP on education and training (6.6%). There is 99% participation for ages 3 and 4. Education is compulsory from age 6 to 18. There is a strong link between the economic, social, and cultural status of students (ESCS) and attainment, and relatively low entry to tertiary phases, linked to parental education (especially for men). This is at least partly due to tracking by ability in secondary schooling, leading to the clustering of students by SES. There is also a policy of grade retention for low performers. Freedom of choice of school is a constitutional right. The earnings difference is relatively small for different levels of qualifications. Higher education is free for those on low incomes.

3.1.3. Bulgaria

Bulgaria is a relatively low equity country. According to OECD [14], there is a strong link between the economic, social, and cultural status of students (ESCS) and their attainment in maths. There are high levels of inequality in the outcomes from PISA, while the actual standard of attainment, including at HE, is low. There is an inappropriate mono-ethnic curriculum in schools. There has been a decline in attainment over 20 years, and increased dropout from education. There was net

out-migration of the more educated population. Teacher salaries are low in terms of GDP. In Bulgaria, it is reported that Roma students cease to self-identify themselves as such once they reach a certain level of education.

3.1.4. Croatia

Croatia is a medium equity country, with large regional and SES gaps in access to pre-school. There is, however, a weak link between ESCS and attainment, and above average equity in PISA outcomes. The actual standard of attainment is reported as low [14]. The system of tracking by ability leads to clustering of students between schools in terms of SES, and this stratification continues into a tertiary system, and even into patterns of participation in adult education.

3.1.5. Cyprus

Cyprus is a low equity country. There was high unemployment among young people aged under 25. Cyprus operates tracking by ability at school. Results in PISA are poor [15]. The school system is based on one faith with sectarian teaching, and no discussion of issues like gay rights (at that time). There is strong definition of ethnic and religious groups, and no formal attempts in education to minimise divisions between ethnic and national groupings. However, little systematic evidence is available on inequalities and their outcomes.

3.1.6. Czech Republic

The Czech Republic is a low equity country. It has low expenditure on ET, with teachers having very low earnings compared to other tertiary educated earners. According to OECD [14], the tertiary education system employs very few female staff. Only 70% of children participate in Early Childhood Education or Care (ECEC) at age 3 and 4, and those missing are more likely to be the most disadvantaged in society. Schooling is compulsory from age 6 to only 15. There is strong tracking by ability from an early age (age 8 in some cases), which leads to a strong link between SES and attainment. Teachers, and to a lesser extent parents, have resisted moves towards de-tracking and greater inclusion. The proportion of the adult population with tertiary qualifications is only 19%, and there is a large difference in earnings and employment linked to these qualifications. The reported levels of trust and civic participation among adults are the lowest in the EU.

3.1.7. Denmark

Denmark is a high equity country. It reports high expenditure on education, especially for teacher salaries. Participation at age 3 and 4 is 97%, and schooling is compulsory from age 6 to 16. Only 83% of students are in publicly-funded schools. The country report suggested that an increase in school choice has led to increased clustering of students by SES (but provides no causal evidence for this). There is a high rate of entry to tertiary education. Graduates at the end of their first degree are among the oldest in the EU (age 28), and then have relatively little difference in earnings and employment compared to other levels of qualification. Adults report high rates of trust and civic participation. Denmark introduced several primary and lower secondary school reforms in the school year 2014/2015, plus grants and loans reform, and vocational education and training reform in the school year 2015/2016.

3.1.8. Estonia

Estonia is a medium equity country. Funding for pre-school education is low [14], and participation in ECEC at age 3 and 4 is 89%. The compulsory school age is from 7 to 16, but participation is not 100% in these years. One of the problems is distance, and the country report describes a target that at least 80% of children do not spend more than an hour travelling to their basic school (a remarkable figure). Minority language speakers, such as Russian, have lower average results in a system that uses only Estonian as a medium of instruction. A high proportion of adults aged 25 to 64 are qualified to upper

secondary and tertiary levels, but with strong links to their parental qualifications [14]. Otherwise, there is only a weak link between ESCS and attainment in PISA. Entry rates to tertiary education are quite low. Female staff predominate at nearly all levels, and their pay is relatively low. Higher education is free, but only for full-time students satisfying a certain number of performance requirements based on prior attainment, meaning that the student body is stratified by SES. Adults report very low rates of trust and civic participation.

3.1.9. Finland

Finland is a high equity country. It has high expenditure on education and training in terms of GDP (6.5%), and teacher salaries are high compared to other forms of tertiary employment. Only 55% of children age 3 and 4 are in early education (as opposed to voluntary day-care). Compulsory schooling traditionally ran from age 7 to 16. The country report describes an increase in parental choice of schools, away from a catchment area system, that has created fragmentation and increased SES segregation, but again presents no good evidence on this. There is a high rate of entry to tertiary education, and a high proportion of adults with tertiary qualifications (40%). These qualifications are only weakly linked to parental education, but strongly linked to earnings. There is high adult participation in education and training (66%). A high proportion of adults report having a say in their government (48%).

3.1.10. France

France is a relatively low equity country, despite egalite being enshrined in its wider constitution. Participation at age 3 and 4 is 99%, and compulsory schooling runs from age 6 to 16. Both primary and secondary attainment is poor, as judged from successive rounds of PISA. There are many early education leavers. There is a relatively low entry rate to tertiary education, with a strong link between tertiary qualification and parental education (especially for women), and a very high link between attainment and ESCS in PISA (22.5). There are few female staff in tertiary teaching. Adult participation in education and training is low, and adults report little trust in others (11%).

3.1.11. Germany

Germany is a medium equity country. In Germany, expenditure on education and training as a proportion of GDP is quite low (5.1%). Participation at age 3 and 4 is 93%, and compulsory schooling runs from age 6 to 18. Despite this high compulsory age, participation of those aged 15 to 19 is only 90%, according to OECD [14]. After four years of secondary schooling, young people are sorted into between two and five tracks. The country report states that there is a large gap in attainment linked to SES, and that immigrant families tend to obtain lower qualifications than average. Tertiary qualifications are relatively low among adults despite university education being free at point of delivery, with a moderate link to parental education, and a large difference in earnings. Employment is high, whatever the qualification level. Relatively few adults report trust in others, or having a say in their government.

3.1.12. Greece

Greece is a medium equity country. Participation at age 3 and 4 was only 26% [14], and compulsory schooling runs from age 5 to only 14/15. Education is free 'at all levels' as part of the constitution, but only for Greek citizens. Students are tracked in upper secondary education, and this tracking is linked to both prior attainment and SES. There is relatively low entry to tertiary education, and a low proportion of tertiary qualifications among adults (27%), with a consequently large difference in related earnings [14]. Employment rates are low, whatever the qualification level of an individual, and rates of adult participation in ET are also low.

3.1.13. Hungary

Hungary is a low equity country. There is low expenditure on education in Hungary, with lower teacher salaries compared to jobs with equivalent qualifications. Participation at age 3 and 4 is 84%, and compulsory schooling runs from age 5 to 18. Attainment in PISA is strongly linked to ESCS. A low proportion of adults have tertiary qualifications (22%), with those attaining tertiary level having a much higher probability of a job, and there is a very high earning difference based on qualifications (but only for men). Very few women teach at tertiary level. The level of NEETs is high—19% of those aged 15 to 29.

3.1.14. Ireland

Ireland is a medium equity country. It spends a reasonably high proportion of GDP on education and training (6.2%). Participation at age 3 and 4 is only 69%, and compulsory schooling runs from age 6 to 16. Fewer than half of Irish Traveller, Gypsy, and Roma children are in mainstream education. The use of parental choice to allocate school places is a problem, creating clustering of students by SES, because the over-subscription criteria include time on the waiting list and having siblings in the school. This is then exacerbated by the widespread use of streaming within schools. A high proportion of adults have tertiary qualifications, linked to considerably greater chances of employment and higher earnings. A high proportion of those aged 15 to 29 are reported as NEET (21%).

3.1.15. Italy

Italy is a medium equity country. As a proportion of GDP, Italy spends relatively little on education and training (4.6%), and the pay for teachers is low. There is a considerable North:South divide in terms of resources and attainment. Participation at age 3 and 4 is 94%, and compulsory schooling runs from age 6 to 16. However, participation at age 15 to 19 is only 81%. The use of tracking by ability from the end of lower secondary school leads to clustering of students by SES and ethnicity. Only 68% of young people are in publicly-funded schools. In-migrants have lower participation and attainment in all phases of education. There are low rates of entry to tertiary education, and low rates of tertiary qualifications among adults aged 25 to 64 (16%). Employment rates, even for graduates, are relatively low. Few women teach at tertiary level. The link between an individual's qualifications and their parents' education is strong, but attainment and ESCS are only weakly linked in PISA. Adult participation in any education or training is low (25%), and adults report low levels of trust and civic participation.

3.1.16. Latvia

Latvia is a medium equity country. A large minority (perhaps 40%) of citizens speak Russian as their first language. Around 83% of children age 3 and 4 participate in early education, with compulsory schooling from age 5 to 16. Vocational secondary education is more likely to lead to unemployment than academic routes do (and the tracking may also create SES segregation between pathways). Although the level of tertiary qualifications among adults is low, entry to tertiary education is high. Teachers receive relatively high pay. There is considerable out-migration of the educated population, and this tends to be prevalent among the most qualified.

3.1.17. Lithuania

Lithuania is a medium equity country. The standard of attainment in PISA is low (with signs of improvement), while equity in terms of variation explained by ESCS is about average. Schools are free to attend, but there are additional costs for families, including pressure for extended tuition. In higher education about 50% of places are fee-based. These fees are high relative to the average salary, meaning that some students from villages and smaller towns face difficulties in covering their living costs. In Lithuania, the records of Roma students leaving schools early may be artificially low

because the funding system gives schools no incentive to report leavers. The rate of adult qualification and education is low. There is net out-migration of the population, especially of the most educated.

3.1.18. Luxembourg

Luxembourg is a medium equity country. Luxembourg is a small country, with three common languages—German, French, and Luxembourgish—for teaching, administration, and home use, respectively. It has high expenditure on education and training. Only 85% of children age 3 and 4 participate in early education, with schooling compulsory from 4 to 16. The country operates a system of tracking by ability and grade retention. Only 77% of young people participate at age 15 to 19, but the rate of NEETs up to age 29 is relatively low. In Luxembourg, around 50% of residents are immigrants, and they tend to perform worse in education at all levels. There is high dropout from education after the age of 18, especially among immigrants. There is a relatively low entry rate to tertiary education, but a high proportion of adults have tertiary qualifications. Those with tertiary qualifications are considerably more likely to be in employment, and to earn more.

3.1.19. Malta

As far as it is possible to tell, Malta is a low equity country. It is also very small. The school system has considerable truancy and non-participation, and a high level of early leaving. There is a strong and growing faith (church) sector creating schools that are, at least, indirectly selective. Religious education was Christian and compulsory, which is a growing problem for equity and policy. There has been a considerable expansion of FE and HE with the opening of a new college. The level of qualifications and participation among adults is generally low. However, the amount of data available and relevant to equity is small.

3.1.20. Netherlands

The Netherlands is, all things considered, a high equity country. In the Netherlands, 91% of children age 3 and 4 participate in early education, and schooling is compulsory from age 5 to 18. A high proportion of students are retained to repeat a grade (sometimes more than once) based on low attainment, and this tends to be stratified by SES and ethnic origin. Entry rates to tertiary education are high, but strongly linked to parental education. The link between attainment and ESCS in PISA is weak. There is high non-completion (nearly 30%) in tertiary education. The Netherlands has high employment, a low level of NEETs, high adult participation, high adult ICT skills, and high levels of trust and civic participation.

3.1.21. Poland

Poland is a low equity country. Only 53% of children age 3 and 4 participated in early education, and schooling is compulsory from age 5 to 16. The rate of tertiary qualification is low among adults, but entry to tertiary education is high (41% in 2013). Tertiary qualifications are very strongly linked to the parental education of the student, and there are high differentials for subsequent employment and earnings. Poland has low adult participation, low adult ICT skills, and adults report low levels of trust and civic participation.

3.1.22. Portugal

Portugal is a low equity country. Spending on education and training is low, and there are large regional differences in expenditure and attainment. Around 85% of children aged 3 and 4 participate in early education, and schooling is compulsory from age 6 to 18. Attainment in PISA is strongly linked to student ESCS. There is a high rate of grade retention or repetition, especially for boys. In Portugal, early leaving or dropout is higher for Roma girls than boys, whereas girls in general are outperforming and outstaying boys in every aspect of initial education across the other 28 countries. The rate of tertiary

qualification is low among adults (19%), but entry to tertiary education is high. Adult participation is moderately low.

3.1.23. Romania

Romania is a low equity country. According to the country reports, the disadvantaged groups tend to be those in rural areas, and Roma. These groups often have lower access to institutions, and the schools in rural areas receive less funding proportionately. Rural students are more likely to leave school at the end of lower secondary, and are heavily over-represented in the professional VET schools that have lower prestige and poorer outcomes. In Romania, attainment in PISA has been low, with a wide variation between high and low attainers, and a relatively high link between attainment and ESCS. Romania had the lowest teacher salaries in the EU in 2012.

3.1.24. Slovak Republic

The Slovak Republic is a low equity country. Spending on education and training is very low as a proportion of GDP. Only 68% of children aged 3 and 4 attend pre-school, with compulsory schooling from age 6 to 16. Only 85% of those aged 15 to 19 are in education or training, with a high proportion of NEETs up to age 29. Few adults have tertiary qualifications, few participate in any education at all, and few have good IT skills. The link between qualifications and earnings is strong. Adults report low levels of trust in others, and low civic participation.

3.1.25. Slovenia

Slovenia is a medium equity country. Teachers receive relatively high pay in Slovenia. Participation for children aged 3 and 4 is 87%, with compulsory schooling from age 6 to only 14 (in 2014). The level of NEETs is low. Few adults have tertiary qualifications, but entry to tertiary education is now high, and qualifications are linked to high differences in subsequent earnings. There is high unemployment, even among graduates. There is net out-migration of the population, especially for the most educated. There are few women teachers in a male-dominated higher education sector.

3.1.26. Spain

Spain is a medium equity country. Spain has middling figures for many areas of performance and equity. Participation for children aged 3 and 4 is 96%, with compulsory schooling from age 6 to 16. Only 86% of young people participate from age 15 to 19. There are many NEETs (26%), and there is low adult participation at any level. Youth unemployment was at 55%. In Spain, less than half of students complete their higher education successfully. Adult earnings are relatively low, whatever an individual's qualification level.

3.1.27. Sweden

Sweden is a high equity country. Expenditure on education and training is high (6.3% of GDP). Participation for children aged 3 and 4 is 93%, with compulsory schooling from age 7 to 16. There is a relatively low link between qualifications and parental education, and a low link between attainment and ESCS in PISA. According to OECD [14], in Sweden, new immigrants tend to do worse in schooling. The level of NEETs is low, participation by adults is high, and adults report good IT skills, and a high level of trust in others.

3.1.28. UK

The UK is, on balance, a high equity country. It is really four separate systems of ET, for the home countries of England, Northern Ireland, Scotland, and Wales. The UK spends a reasonably high proportion of GDP on education and training (6.4%). There is 95% participation for children aged 3 and 4, with education and training compulsory from age 4/5 to 18. The proportion of the adult

population with tertiary level qualifications is the highest in the EU (41%), perhaps because the UK has a mature, but imperfect, system for the recognition of prior learning and equivalences between types of qualification. There is a low link between ESCS and attainment. Reported IT skills are good. The UK has a relatively equitable education system, with improvement in attainment gaps between social groups over time [16]. The link between prior qualifications and adult participation is strong. School intakes are partially clustered in terms of SES by selection, faith/sectarianism, and school diversity. In the UK, new immigrants tend to do worse in schooling. Irish Traveller, Gypsy, and Roma students are less likely to attend school, obtain any given level of qualification, or continue to post-compulsory ET [17].

3.2. Patterns of Equity across Countries

It is interesting to look at the common (and specific) characteristics of countries with similar levels of equity in ET. This can produce a tentative guide to the determinants of equity, barriers to progress, and possible ways forward.

Table 2 shows that there is a strong but imperfect relationship between the UN Human Development Index for any country and its perceived level of equity in education and training. The higher equity countries have among the lowest links between attainment/participation and individual background, and among the highest HD indices as well, while the lower equity countries have relatively low index scores (for the EU). The countries that have relatively low equity for their index score (such as Germany, Ireland, or Austria) are the ones which have self-imposed barriers such as early tracking, and choice coupled with religious schools.

Table 2. Selected educational indicators and Human Development Index scores, 2014. ESCS: Economic, social, and cultural status of students; HE: Higher education.

Country	PISA% Explained by ESCS	HE Qualified% Aged 25–64	Odds of HE If Parent Upper Secondary (Men)	Odds of HE If Parent Upper Secondary (Women)	HD Index	Equity Band (Judgement)
Netherlands	12	34	1.7	1.1	0.92	Higher
Sweden	11	36	0.6	1.4	0.90	Higher
Denmark	17	35	1.3	2.0	0.90	Higher
UK	13	41	2.4	2.0	0.89	Higher
Finland	9	40	1.1	1.3	0.88	Higher
Germany	17	28	2.9	2.0	0.91	Medium
Ireland	15	40	1.5	2.6	0.90	Medium
Luxembourg	18	39	-	-	0.88	Medium
Belgium	20	35	2.8	1.9	0.88	Medium
France	23	31	1.5	2.1	0.88	Medium
Italy	10	16	4.8	4.9	0.87	Medium
Spain	16	32	1.9	2.0	0.87	Medium
Slovenia	16	26	-	-	0.87	Medium
Greece	16	27	-	-	0.86	Medium
Estonia	9	37	3.5	2.5	0.84	Medium
Lithuania	14	-	-	-	0.83	Medium
Croatia	12	-	-	-	0.81	Medium
Latvia	15	29	-	-	0.81	Medium
Austria	16	20	1.4	3.1	0.88	Lower
Czech Republic	16	19	-	-	0.86	Lower
Cyprus	-	-	-	-	0.85	Lower
Malta	-	-	-	-	0.83	Lower
Poland	17	25	3.0	3.4	0.83	Lower
Slovak Republic	25	19	-	-	0.83	Lower
Portugal	20	19	-	-	0.82	Lower

Table 2. Cont.

Country	PISA% Explained by ESCS	HE Qualified% Aged 25–64	Odds of HE If Parent Upper Secondary (Men)	Odds of HE If Parent Upper Secondary (Women)	HD Index	Equity Band (Judgement)
Hungary	23	22	-	-	0.82	Lower
Romania	19	-	-	-	0.79	Lower
Bulgaria	22	-	-	-	0.78	Lower

Sources: Sorted by equity judgement and HD index [14,18]. Note: Where full national data is not available, the UK is represented by England, and Belgium by Flanders.

3.2.1. Higher Equity Country Characteristics

The higher equity countries summarised above are Denmark, Finland, Sweden, and (on balance) the Netherlands and UK. Their situations are not ideal, and they all report issues with low attainment for some new immigrants, for example. The main indications are relatively low links between an individual's background and their trajectory in education, and relatively high levels of less-stratified participation in post-compulsory education and training. These countries either have a relatively weak link between parental economic, social, and cultural status (ESCS) and student attainment in maths (PISA), or a weak link between the chances of tertiary/upper secondary qualification and the qualification of parents, or both.

All five countries also have high performance, attainment, and participation in many areas of education and training. This shows that quality and equality are not in tension, and in fact generally go hand in hand. The results in international assessments like PISA 2012 are repeatedly above average. They have high rates of entry to higher education for new students, relatively strong participation in adult ET, and a high proportion of adults with good IT skills.

All spend a relatively high proportion of GDP on education and training, with teacher salaries roughly equivalent to that of the average of all graduate occupations. Funding for early education is disproportionately targeted at poorer areas and families (rather than flat funding, or even weighted towards the already advantaged as happens in some countries). At the time, their overall economies were reasonably strong, with employment at a high level (pre-Covid). They are not alone in this, and so expenditure in itself may be an important step in promoting equity but is not sufficient, and may be hindered by the self-imposed barriers reported in other countries (see below).

None of these countries operate a national or regional policy of sorting children and young people into separate tracks at an early age. Only the Netherlands uses grade repetition or retention to address individual low attainment. While there is increasing diversity of schooling and an independent sector, their systems as a whole do not have a faith basis. These factors are all likely to be part of the reason why high expenditure is linked to equality in these systems.

The level of young NEETs is low except in the UK. These countries have previously set up laws, processes, and rights that other countries are only implementing now, including recognition of prior learning and a national equivalence for all qualifications. They all have adults who report exceptionally high levels of one of the following—volunteering, trust in others, or having a say in how they are governed. This wider outcome is likely to be partly a result of the high equity in the system [2].

High equity countries have mature monitoring systems which can track outcomes for social and other groups. Netherlands and the UK also fund programmes of robust experimental studies to try to pin down 'what works' best in education policy and practice.

3.2.2. Lower Equity Country Characteristics

Ten EU countries could be described as lower equity in terms of ET—Austria, Bulgaria, Cyprus, the Czech Republic, Hungary, Malta, Poland, Portugal, Romania, and the Slovak Republic. To a large

extent, their relative position is the inverse of the high equity countries. Many have at least one sector of excellence and signs of progress elsewhere.

The indications of inequity include a strong link between an individual's attainment and their parental background. In all these countries, where known, the outcomes from PISA 2012 showed high levels of variance, and strong links to ESCS, and/or there is a strong link between parental education/SES and an individual's qualifications. Several countries also have very polarised staffing in the different sectors, with very few women teaching at higher education level, and particularly strong links between tertiary qualification and employment/earnings.

In general, the standards of attainment, progression, and participation in these countries are also quite low. This is reflected in school non-attendance, early dropout, relatively low PISA scores, low levels of qualifications among adults, high level of young NEETs, low adult participation, and few adults reporting good IT skills. Again, this suggests that striving for quality and equality can be done in tandem.

None of these countries appear to have high expenditure on ET, as a proportion of GDP, and some have the lowest expenditure and the lowest teacher salaries in the EU. Some countries face considerable levels of out-migration (largely to other EU countries). This suggests that expenditure is a key preliminary determinant of equity. Where known, the reported levels of trust and civic participation among adults in these countries are among the lowest in the EU.

All of these countries also appear to have created some barriers to educational equity, especially in the compulsory schooling phase. These barriers include grade retention at school for poor performers (Austria, Portugal), early tracking by ability (Austria, Cyprus, Czech Republic), a mono-ethnic curriculum (Bulgaria), a strong sectarian faith-basis for schools, and/or a school system based on one state religion that does not allow curriculum time for discussion of individual rights and diversity of lifestyle (Cyprus, Malta).

Very few of the low equity countries have well-established monitoring systems. There is a danger that these countries expend effort on displacement activities (such as IT or parental engagement) rather than tackling structural problems and self-imposed barriers (such as early tracking).

3.2.3. Generic Issues of Equity in the Reports

Some equity issues appear to be common to, or at least widespread in, all 28 countries.

All countries show some gaps in attainment and opportunities, even from the outset of early education. Wherever this has been assessed, there is a clear correlation between family background and average attainment and subsequent participation in ET. On average, children from poorer, less educated families with less skilled and prestigious occupations tend to do worse at school, by a relatively small amount, and are less likely to continue after initial education. In all societies, some disadvantaged children do well, while some privileged children do badly, but there remains an overall poverty or social gradient in achievement. This 'reproduction' across generations might be justified if it were produced by a difference in talent or effort. Otherwise it would be inequitable. None of the countries report the kind of data needed to decide on this crucial area. Nearly all assume that the difference must be a sign of inequity.

The pattern of progress in later adult learning (in formal settings) may be reducing due to lower funding, and becoming more focused on those already possessing qualifications and higher status jobs. Where the actual levels of gaps are reported by countries, they appear to be worse in adult education than in earlier phases of ET.

Most countries report that earnings and employment are linked to qualifications, and have phases of education with teachers patterned by their sex (more women with younger age students, and more men in tertiary phases).

3.3. Home and Own Language Education

One issue, manifested in very different ways in all countries, is that of allowing students to learn in their home language, especially while retaining cohesion in a country with several language groups. The same applies to countries like devolved Belgium and UK with separate educational systems, partly based on home language, for regions like Flanders and Wales. The same kinds of equity issues apply as for devolved systems more generally. In many ways, the provision of own-language education is fair. Difference in treatment or provision is not necessarily evidence of inequity, but it does permit or even encourage differential resources being available to only some of the population in any country. It can also lead to ethnic or even SES clustering between institutions.

3.4. Migrants

All countries have recent in-migrants. Some countries (including Bulgaria, Lithuania, and Slovenia) are net losers, both in the number of residents moving to other countries, and in the fact that these migrants tend to be better educated. Countries that are net gainers in terms of immigration report that these immigrants generally fare worse in education. However, in the UK, many ethnic minorities have above average achievement [17]. The results and trajectories for immigrant groups depend partly on their origin and prior SES, and partly on whether the individuals have arrived with an intention to stay (seeing education as an investment) or not [19]. Once the level of migration is accounted for, countries with a more inclusive migration policy experience less classroom disruption due to ethnic diversity [20]. Ethnic minority students make greater progress with language in less ethnically-segregated schools [21–23].

3.5. Travellers and Roma

The data on travellers and Roma education are reported as being weak or incomplete in several countries, even some of those with high quality administrative records [24]. In some countries, Roma children, as well as some with behavioural difficulties, are routinely placed in special schools as though they had been diagnosed with special educational needs or disabilities. Where data are available, such as in the UK, Irish Traveller, Gypsy, and Roma students are less likely to attend school, obtain any given level of qualification, or continue to post-compulsory ET. In Ireland, less than half of traveller children are in mainstream education.

3.6. Tracking and Selection

A large number of countries in the EU still have selection into tracks, or schools with differentiated curricula, at a relatively early age. The selection of tracks is done on the basis of prior attainment, which is strongly correlated at these early ages with SES and family background. Therefore, tracking leads to substantial, and needless, social/ethnic segregation between schools and tracks [25]. The consequences can be seen not only in higher segregation, but also in wider attainment gaps [26], greater age-in-year differences [27], lower aspirations for some students, weaker civic knowledge for low SES students [28], lower teacher expectations [29], and also in civic engagement such as voting patterns [30,31]. Some countries have tried to delay the onset of tracking, reduce the number of tracks, or improve the outcomes from the less prestigious tracks. There has been some public resistance to all of these measures. None have yet tried abolishing the concept altogether, despite the fact that the research evidence overwhelmingly suggests that any form of selection merely exacerbates inequalities in outcomes without improving attainment overall [32,33].

3.7. Retention and Grade Repetition

Several countries, including Austria, Belgium, Luxembourg, and Portugal, practice grade repetition for weaker students, sometimes repeatedly. This means that some students are considerably older than their classroom peers, and they tend to come from more disadvantaged backgrounds. In Portugal they

are more often boys. No evidence is presented that such retention is effective for students or the system as a whole. Retention appears to have a long-term damaging impact on language achievement [34], and on education more generally, even for kindergarten children [35]. Equalising interventions, such as catch-up literacy schemes, taking place in the correct age group, would be more effective, and less demeaning for the individuals concerned [36].

3.8. *The Role of Religion*

Some countries have state education systems founded on a single state religion that faces having to accommodate other religions and a rapidly growing sector of society with no religion. Some face tension between the state religion and demands for equality and tolerance of minority groups such as LGBT. Some have school intakes stratified by SES and ethnicity as a consequence of allowing faith schools to recruit for themselves, and this has much the same impact on SES stratification as retention and early tracking. It is a widespread but largely unaddressed source of inequity in some countries [37]. Institutional racism could be a factor in the dominance of religious schools in some countries, and in the resistance to reform [38]. There is wider evidence that attempts to reform the system can meet resistance and delays from the dominant religion(s) [39]. Yet these problems, like the barriers to equity of retention and early tracking, are self-imposed by these countries. Equity could be improved at a stroke by removing religion from the public sphere of state education to the private one of the individual and their family, for example.

3.9. *Equity Principle behind Financial Assistance*

Most countries provide some form of financial assistance to those who ‘deserve’ it at some stage of the education and training process, because cost is widely perceived as a barrier to educational participation and progress. However, two very different principles of equity are in play here. Some countries (such as Croatia) offer financial help based on merit rather than on need. For example, those with the highest qualifications are permitted free entry to higher education. Other countries (such as the UK) offer financial help based on need alone. For example, all children from families with incomes below a certain level are entitled to a free lunch at school, and their school receives a Pupil Premium to help increase their attainment [40]. Several countries use both principles at once, usually at different phases of lifelong ET.

4. **Discussions and Conclusions: Education and Training in Europe 2020**

Education and Training in Europe 2020 [1] was concerned with four broad issues in education, each of which could have implications for equity:

- Early school leaving (before the end of upper secondary, plus age 18–24 and not in current ET);
- improving attainment in and the quality of higher education;
- improving skills and VET for youth employment;
- increasing adult participation in lifelong learning.

Targets were set relevant to each of these issues, phrased along traditional lines in the format of—by 2020 a certain proportion or sub-set of the population must have a specified characteristic, such as a qualification. These targets are clearly intended to provide a challenge to improve participation and attainment in ET. However, they have the limits that all such traditional targets traditionally do [17]. In this context, they are concerned with absolute levels in ET, not with equity as such. None of the targets specify who is to be involved in any phase of ET, and because the targets are for less than 100%, all targets could theoretically be achieved and still leave out the most disadvantaged remainder. Therefore, the first general recommendation for policy is that countries agree on some further simple targets for ET that are directly relevant to improving equity. What some of these might concern is discussed further below.

4.1. Wider Outcomes

The focus of the current targets (and much of the rest of EU and individual country policy) is on attainment and participation. The targets have an overtly human capital and economic basis. This is worthwhile, because education and training are relevant to economic recovery, and there are issues of social justice linked to that, such as reducing youth unemployment and subsequent relative poverty. But there is a wide range of other possible outcomes and benefits from ET not addressed by such targets, including securing justice, social cohesion, active citizenship, inclusion, democratic rights, and enhancing tolerance. Promoting these is not necessarily in tension with the first objective, as shown in the analysis of the country reports.

The principles of equity (Table 1) must be embodied in educational organisations (it is almost impossible to teach religious tolerance in a sectarian school, for example), and also in the way teachers interact with their students. It must be exemplified throughout the curriculum rather than just appear as a specific topic, and this requires continuing development for teachers.

The human capital approach underlying the 2020 benchmarks also leaves adults of the third age neglected, and this is not equitable. The adult sector in most countries is usually the weakest, yet has the weakest evidence reported for it. The evidence on the third age is practically non-existent. So, a recommendation for policy is that countries agree to further simple targets for ET that are directly relevant to improving wider outcomes.

4.2. Monitoring

It is clear that considerable progress needs to be made in monitoring patterns of participation and attainment in many countries. Most countries could improve their official data collection for all phases of education and training, and many countries have almost no data relevant to equity. This needs to be remedied quickly. Making visible and recognising the patterns of inequality is a key step to tackling them. One recommendation would be an EU-required annual census of compulsory school intakes, like the Annual Schools Census element of the National Pupil Database in England.

4.3. Evaluation

The situation for robust evaluations is even worse. Few countries report any serious attempts at evaluation at all, and the situation is the same at the EU-level. The key first step here is to realise the practical importance of testing whether policy interventions make any difference to their objectives, and if so, whether the difference is beneficial overall. Such evaluation is not difficult [41]. It generally just involves rolling out policy in such a way that there is a clear comparator and explicit success/failure criteria from the outset. Nor is it expensive. Policy interventions in education and training are very expensive. Knowing whether they are effective, ineffective, or even harmful comes at a fraction of the price, and should improve overall cost-effectiveness of policies. The Institute of Education Sciences in the US and the Educational Endowment Foundation in England have begun to show how funding can be channelled into evaluations. Claims to effectiveness must have a clear and fair counterfactual (demonstrating what would happen without the intervention). Otherwise, there is a danger that policy-makers are happy just to announce plausible-sounding policies, without consideration of true impact. In order to improve equity in practice, it is essential to know what is likely to work, especially to benefit the most disadvantaged students.

This would be a fourth general recommendation.

4.4. Equal Treatment of Students

The first principle of equity relevant to ET (Table 1) is that all students and potential students should be treated equally, all other things being equal. This principle generates many implications for practice. Funding should be equivalent across the country for all equivalent students in each context. Education systems should be inclusive, in the sense that all students should attend the same

kind of school and have the same kind of chances (which may involve providing travel to school for disadvantaged students in areas of low population density). Provision should be universal, free (or at least affordable for all), and compulsory. Publicly-funded institutions should not be selective on the basis of ability, need, personal characteristics, or family background. The intakes can then be as mixed as possible, socially and ethnically. There is no valid argument for grade repetition, or starting struggling children in younger age cohorts. There is no need for specific diversity of institutional provision. All students should have the same opportunities wherever they live in the country.

It is widely thought that there is a difference between systems discriminating against disadvantaged groups and systems setting general academic standards for admission. There is in theory. However, all of the available evidence and all of the country reports show that this never happens in practice. Selection by attainment, aptitude, or ability leads to stratification, whether in selective schools, streaming, or in entry to higher education. One consequence is that alternatives such as high-quality VET may be viewed as second-best or of lower social prestige. This leads to absurd situations such as those mentioned in the country reports where incentives have to be provided for employers to take graduates from VET supposedly intended to employability. As long as HE is selective in a way that is already stratified by socio-economic background, and a very large proportion of the young population is intended to be excluded by policy-makers, this tension will remain.

Countries should clear all artificial impediments to equality during compulsory phases of education. They may not be able to do much about inequalities of SES background between students in the medium-term, but they can ensure that all students are provided with equal opportunities, and that where they live is unrelated to the quality of their education. The dominant principle of equity up to the end of compulsory schooling must be that equality of opportunity, not some kind of ‘parity’ of opportunities. The impediments include selection, diversity of school types, the involvement of religion in school organisation, grade repetition, delayed entry to kindergarten, and early tracking. All have a similar impact in clustering students of similar types, and so increasing SES segregation between schools. This clustering is very harmful for the wider outcomes of schools (such as trust or aspiration), and makes no overall difference to attainment [30].

There is a need for a national curriculum of entitlement in each country, that will also aid staff and student mobility between regions and institutions. There must be recognition of prior experience and learning, and a national framework of qualifications and their equivalences.

4.5. Thresholds of Entitlement for Students

The second principle, which is partly in tension with the first, would be that objectively disadvantaged students may, on average, need extra help to obtain some of the most basic outcomes from ET. This help is equitable up to an agreed point or threshold of entitlement. Again, this principle generates many implications. It leads to schemes of extra funding for each disadvantaged student to help fund catch-up and second-chance interventions. The funding must be targeted accurately and continue for only as long as it is needed (until the threshold of entitlement is reached or the student is no longer objectively disadvantaged). Children with learning challenges, disabilities, behavioural problems, and those not yet speaking the language of instruction must be taught in mainstream settings as far as possible (schools are social arenas with vertical as well as age-related activities, for example). The extra funding would follow them and pay for additional assistance. Most countries already report attempts to do something like this, but there are differences of approach. Some allocate the funding to regions or institutions, which is less flexible than allocation to specifically disadvantaged students [10].

One of the main areas to spend such extra funding would be interventions both to prevent struggling students from falling behind and to provide ‘compensatory’ or catch-up programmes for those who have already missed their entitlement. A number of evidence-based schemes are available, and more are being proposed all of the time. None of the successful schemes involve retention or tracking. Many more need robust evaluation [36].

4.6. *Respect for All Students*

The third main relevant principle of equity is respect for the individual. This applies mainly to interpersonal respect, as in the interactions between teachers and students [2]. It would likely have benefits in terms of aspirations, appropriate trust in authority, and civic participation. It involves considerable autonomy for learners and minimising their power differential with teachers [42], but it could lead to higher self-esteem, less depression, and less social dysfunction among low SES students [43]. This, in turn, currently requires improved development of teachers in respect to equity issues. The principle requires socially and ethnically mixed schools, so that schools cease merely to represent divisions in wider society, but can begin to overcome them by providing a decade or more of how society could be. A further recommendation is that wider outcomes such as aspiration and civic participation form part of the routine monitoring system proposed above.

4.7. *Opportunities Open to Merit*

A fourth relevant principle of equity is about merited reward. This is the hardest to apply. The ideas of selection into schools, tracking, and grade repetition are partly driven by this principle. It leads, almost inevitably, to stratification of intake and opportunities. What Table 1 is trying to portray is that the context needs to be taken into account when deciding whether a specific principle of equity is fair or not. For example, awarding a higher mark for a piece of work done well by one student is fair. Determining the entire future of a young child on the basis of one such mark is not fair.

Almost all countries report entry to HE as occurring on ‘merit’, which in practical terms means using prior student attainment or sometimes a bespoke test result to decide on over-subscribed places. But no research evidence explains why this is done at all, why only at that stage of ET rather than at an earlier or later age, and why any specific proportion of the population should be included or excluded.

The international evidence also suggests that while the cost of attending HE may be a barrier for some, removing that barrier does not alter participation of under-represented and disadvantaged groups much, for the reasons given above [44]. More promising is the recommendation on the validation of non-formal and informal learning, that promotes the validation of “qualifications or, where applicable, parts of qualifications obtained by means of the validation of non-formal and informal learning experiences comply with agreed standards that are either the same as, or equivalent to, the standards for qualifications obtained through formal education programmes”. The nature of the student body is more likely to be altered by changing the nature of prior qualifications deemed suitable for entry to HE than perhaps any other approach. This is important, as the Bucharest Communiqué from 2012 committed countries “to adopt national measures to widen overall access to quality higher education” and reiterated the objective “that the student body entering and graduating from higher education should reflect the diversity of Europe’s populations, along with the specific treatment of the social dimension in higher education in the 2012 Bologna Process implementation report, examining available statistical information on the impact of students’ background on participation in higher education and different policy approaches to widening access”.

The outcome of using ‘merit’ is that HE in each country is stratified in terms of personal background variables that it would usually be illegal/unethical to select students on explicitly. The stratifying variables include age, sex, ethnic group, and parental SES. Of course, such variables could be used as context factors to adjust for levels of attainment, but then it is not clear to what extent the resultant decisions are based on merit [10]. If national assessment systems leading to qualifications are not capable of making fair assessments, it seems unlikely that individual HE institutions could over-ride these assessments fairly. More thought needs to go into this to decide who is intended to be omitted from HE, and more research needs to be conducted involving non-participants in HE as informants [44].

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